

Guest Column: It's no longer business as usual; Real progress must be made to save the Delta

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By Mike Chrisman, California Secretary for Resources, Visalia

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta touches the life of every Californian every day.

It supports vital energy, transportation, communications and water facilities and important agricultural, recreational and cultural resources.

It's also in peril.

Formed by the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, the Delta is truly one of the state's - and the nation's - great natural treasures.

It's home to 700 native species of plants, fish and animals. It's crossed by hundreds of gas lines, six highways, five high-voltage lines and three railroads.

It's the hub of the state's major water supply systems.

The Delta is held together by 1,100 miles of fragile levees. The threat of flooding exists throughout the year, not just during the winter storm season.

Many of the Delta's islands now lie below sea level, sinking lower every time a plow passes and the peat soil is carried away on the Delta breeze.

Californians made an investment on Nov. 7 to repair levees and improve flood protection, supporting the first phase of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's Strategic Growth Plan.

This will provide \$4 billion to keep Californians safe from flood and to protect habitat and water supply.

I'm working with the governor on a second phase of this important plan.

If placed on the ballot, voters will have the opportunity to allocate nearly \$6 billion to enhance the Delta's sustainability, build new water reservoirs, increase the state's water supply and fund water conservation efforts.

There's a real, pressing need for more investment.

In addition to flood risk, the Delta faces significant changes to its ecosystem. The number and variety of fish have declined dramatically over the past five years.

The desire for affordable housing close to urban centers means increased development is coming - changing the character of this unique and historic place.

In order to address the Delta's needs, the governor signed an executive order creating the Delta Vision plan.

Last week, he issued this challenge to the newly formed Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force: develop a durable vision for sustainable management of the Delta and a strategic plan for its implementation.

This task is no small undertaking. Competing interests have battled over the Delta's resources for decades.

The governor carefully chose the seven individuals who will work during the next 18 months, under the leadership of Chairman Phil Isenberg, to ensure they make a significant difference.

In addition, a 40-member group of Delta stakeholders soon will be named.

They also will play an integral role in representing the San Joaquin Valley's interests statewide.

Californians have learned volumes about the Delta over the past several decades.

What we know today, from the impact of global climate change to moving water through the Delta for a growing population, has come from research, such as the Public Policy Institute of California study released last week.

It also has come from work done by local, state and federal agencies, academic institutions and stakeholders.

Members of the task force and Delta group will draw on this expertise - and request additional research as necessary - to arrive at recommendations that are innovative and capable of being implemented.

Common among the task force's members is a strong ability to understand and solve complex problems, starting from the premise that "business as usual" will not - and cannot - work in the Delta any longer.

Californians must protect this natural system, for the sake of our drinking water and our economy.

Delta Vision is all about finding that balance.